) promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which nere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Church Builds the Country Community

By The Most Rev. Edwin V. O'Hara*

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I feel it a great honor to be invited to address the American Country Life Association because of the many years during which I enjoyed active participation in your annual meetings. This year you are fittingly commemorating the fortieth anniversary of President Theodore Roosevelt's important message to Congress on rural life in America.

That message, with its keynote of "better farming, better business, better living," awakened in our country a tardy interest in the welfare of rural people, and contributed directly to the establishment of your own association. Of those who were members of the Theodore Roosevelt Commission on Rural Life, I recall well two figures actively interested with this association from its inception. I refer to those gallant leaders: Liberty Hyde Bailey and Kenyon Butterfield.

Theodore Roosevelt always generously acknowledged his indebtedness for ideas in the rural field to the statesmen who had established the Irish Agricultural Organization Society nearly twenty years earlier. I had personal acquaintance with the triumvirate who were responsible for the promotion of that movement. Of these the best known was Sir Horace Plunkett, who spent a decade ranching in Montana at the same time that Theodore Roosevelt was similarly employed in Dakota, namely, in the 1880's. It was not, however, until the winter of 1905-1906 that Horace Plunkett, during frequent visits to the White House, exchanged his thoughts on rural philosophy extensively with the President. In his articles in the Outlook, later published in a book entitled, Rural Problems in the United States, Sir Horace asserted that his movement anticipated the lines of the well-known formula of the President: "Better farming, better business, better living."

I met Plunkett on his subsequent visits to America and became acquainted with his most distinguished collaborators in the Irish Agricultural Organization Society in Dublin in 1925. Deeply treasured in my memory is a visit with George William Russell, the famous "AE," in his editorial office of the Irish Statesman, and with the third member of the group, the Jesuit educator, Father Thomas Finlay.

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*An address by The Most Rev. Edwin V. O'Hara, Bishop of Kansas City, at the Annual Meeting of the American Country Life Association, Columbus, Ohio, September 9, 1949.

Plunkett has a curious and thought-provoking observation in his book, Rural Problems in the United States, to the effect that "the subordination of country to town is peculiar to English-speaking countries," and he quotes with approval the observation of the French statesman, Senator Jules Meline, that the "well being of a people is like a tree: agriculture is its root, manufacturing and commerce are its branches.

These convictions, shared and expressed by both Plunkett and Theodore Roosevelt, make it obvious that the problems of rural life stressed in his message by the President, forty years ago, are a challenge to both enlightened citizenship and to civil government. It may not be so clear, however, why the Church should single out agriculture among all the fields of economic endeavor for its special concern. Religion raises the standard of justice and charity wherever human beings earn their living in association with their fellows. The social doctrine of religion must be applied to every field of economics. But why specifically is there a Catholic Rural Conference? That, I presume, is the question I am expected to answer in this address. I answer by asking what is the most important product of the country community?

The imagination goes at once to the fields of wheat and corn, the flocks of sheep, the herds of cattle and hogs, the fruit orchards and the forests. Obviously, you say, the prime product of the country is food and fibre, the raw products which city industry refines for our use. Such a statement neglects a most important contribution of country life. The rural community supplies the life blood of the cities. The most important contribution of the country is its crop of children. It is well known that any city of America, if left dependent on its own birth rate, would be found to be dying on its feet. Its population would shrink; its industries would go into permanent decline.

When I began the studies which led immediately to the Catholic Rural Life Conference, I noted in the 1910 census the latest figures then available that rural and urban populations in the United States were reported as almost equal in number, practically fifty-fifty. But the school population that year was approximately sixty per cent rural and forty per cent urban. That told the story then, and the same tendencies persist today; the children are overwhelming in the country. The rural family is the source of the growth of our national population.

The farm is the natural habitat of strong, united, vigorous, and prolific family life. Between the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and such family life as I have just described there is historically and philosophically a mutual bond of offense and defense. Whatever weakens religion undermines the family; whatever weakens the monogamic family deteriorates the spiritual forces of society and leads to national collapse. The stake of religion in rural life is its concern for the three vital institutions of human society: the home, the church, and the state.

What then, in the view of the Catholic Church, is the rural problem? It is, basically, the problem of keeping actively in the rural community a large percentage of the intelligent and spiritually-minded boys and girls who are born there. Only such a population will be able to vitalize the rural community and solve the economic, social, and religious question of the countryside. I say that it is a question of keeping a larger percentage of intelligent farm-born and -bred boys and girls in the field of agriculture. It is obvious that not all the children born on the farm can reasonably be expected to remain there. There is a surplus that must overflow into the city for the benefit of both country and

city. I need not point out that successful farming requires a working knowledge of scientific principles -- chemical and biological -- and at the same time a capacity for business management and mechanical skill, a combination rarely required in other occupations. It requires talent and character far above the average to provide the "better farming, better business, and better living" that President Theodore Roosevelt desiderated in 1909 for the farms of America.

What motives can the Church present and what methods can she use to induce a larger percentage of the intelligent and capable boys and girls to remain on the land? In the first place, the country pastor must realize the challenge of his own position, for he is the key figure in the aim of the Catholic Rural Life Conference to build up ten thousand spiritually-strong country parishes. He must realize that a wholesome rural community must have a high percentage of intelligent and conscientious men and women. Consequently, he will address himself to the task of inducing the most intelligent boys and girls to remain in the community, and he will counsel their parents to open opportunities for their boys and girls to begin farming either in their own community or in another farming area or to equip themselves to serve in one of the many fields of the agricultural professions.

But what motives can the rural pastor offer to restrain the rush of his intelligent and imaginative boys and girls to the professions and the attractions of city life? Of course, he can tell the truth about city life for the multitude -- city life with its worries and anxieties, with its uncertain employment and extensive wretched housing, its temptations, and its heartaches. I think, however, that such a line of argument, frequently reiterated, would be a dismal recital and might be laid to prejudice or personal disappointment. Besides, it is a negative approach and cannot provide a satisfactory basis for a positive movement.

No, I would have the country pastor consider city life at its best and yet find the rural community preferable. I would have him present three sound considerations to the people of his parish which, I am confident, will win the substantial approval of the group he must especially address. You will keep in mind that I am asking him to address himself in this matter to the most intelligent and imaginative boys and girls of his parish.

The country pastor then will say to the youth of his parish on many occasions and in different words: <u>first</u>, economic independence is the best safeguard for intellectual independence, which is the first prerequisite of an enlightened mind and a liberal culture. He may tell the farm boys and girls of the conclusions expressed by an educational authority, Dr. Dexter Merriam Keezer, in his recent book, <u>The Light That Flickers</u>. Dr. Keezer, formerly president of one of our well-known liberal arts colleges, despairs of liberal education in the absence of fairly widespread economic independence which, he thinks, is virtually unattainable in modern city industry. Dr. Keezer is solicitous for liberal education to resist "the impact of forces which now so powerfully tend to make sheep out of the citizenry." "Liberal education," he writes, "is not for or by the "yes" men which the sweep of forces created by modern industrialism tend strongly to make of most of us." (page 63)

The country pastor will observe that the widest distribution of economic independence in America is to be found in the farm families who own their own farms. They are the owners of productive property and are not dependent for their living on the whims and opinions of others, no matter how powerful. If

you, my young men and women, he will say, wish to have the intellectual independence which comes with the ownership of productive property, seek it in the ownership of one of the five million farms in this country. My opinion in this matter is confirmed by the counsel given in 1891 by that modern statesman, Pope Leo XIII, in his famous encyclical, "On the Condition of Labor." Leo XIII advised the laboring man to save his earnings and purchase a farm so that he might enjoy economic independence for himself and his family. It is still sound advice for intelligent and conscientious young men and women.

Secondly, the alert country pastor will say to his people: next to the ownership of productive property, the most desirable thing for an intelligent person is to be self-employed. That is the status of the farm family. It accepts responsibility for its own conduct; it exercises its own initiative throughout the week, month, and year. It chooses the time of seeding and of harvest. It does not have its conduct every working hour dictated by foremen, supervisors, and bosses, as is the case in city industrial life, but with its head erect it chooses its path and wins its own success and accepts responsibility for its own failures. Such is the life for intelligent, imaginative, and competent men and women. Such is the life of five million farm families who share an opportunity equalled nowhere else.

Thirdly, the country pastor will say the greatest natural good in the world is the perpetuation of one's own personality in one's children. In the Old Testament the richest earthly reward was, "You shall see your children's children to the third and fourth generation." Time has not dimmed the happiness which springs from seeing one's own personality reflected in the features of one's own children. All other earthly consolations and joys are trivial in comparison with the deep happiness of a father and mother surrounded by their children. There is, of course, a supernatural motive often expressed by St. Paul which may be reasonably chosen instead of the natural ties of home and children. But certainly the supreme natural good is not to be found in fame, wealth, or amusement, but in the joys of family and children.

That the rural community is the natural environment of the family is recognized by every serious student. I would refer you to Rural-Urban Sociology, by Sorokin and Zimmerman. The city environment is at war with the family. The family is not needed for the urban occupations. The hotel, restaurant, and laundry easily usurp the place of the home. The interests of the wife in the city are entirely extrinsic to the husband's occupation with which, in general, she has slight acquaintance. Children are a liability. To have a child involves the deliberate choice not to have an automobile or some other convenience possessed by one's neighbors. Divorce is a city institution.

On the other hand, the farm is the friend of family life. Husband and wife and children find their lives unified by the occupation in which they earn their living. They have the same economic, social, and intellectual interests. Additional children are a definite asset. Divorce is practically unknown. A strong family tradition forms the minds and characters of children. The country pastor will thus address the intelligent and truly imaginative youth of his parish, and they will see that the rural community furnishes the best hope of genuine happiness for them. In the course of a moderately long pastorate, he will have woven a rural social fabric centered in the parish chur where the young folk will have plighted their vows, and radiating its influence through the institutions of education, recreation, culture, economic cooperatio health, and civic improvement. Here will have been laid the impregnable founda-

tion of an independent citizenry, namely, a wide distribution of private ownership of productive property; here the sense of responsibility and initiative necessary for a free people will be developed in an atmosphere of self-employment; here the strong, unified, wholesome, prolific family life -- which Theodore Roosevelt acclaimed so vigorously and with such wisdom in his message forty years ago -- here in this country community such family life will flourish to the strengthening of the moral fibre of the nation.

Here the rural pastor will instruct his people that they are, in the sight of God, his stewards in the cultivation of their land; that they must in conscience strive to transmit the soil in undiminished fertility to future generations; that neither erosion nor soil depletion through greed is permissible to good stewards of the Divine Master. The pastor will teach them also that they must use every just means to strengthen the position of the single family farm; that special governmental assistance should, in general, be restricted to farms capable of being operated by a single family lest, by giving bonuses to merely commercial operators, the government may bring destruction on the rural family which, once destroyed, could with difficulty ever be renewed.

In this vibrant, rural community, cooperative enterprises will be fostered as a Christian mode of industry. "Bear ye one another's burdens and so you shall fulfil the law of Christ." The farming population will not be misled into regarding cooperatives as merely an advantageous economic arrangement; they will understand that the most necessary antecedents, as well as the most valuable products of cooperation, are in the moral and social order. If, however, out of a sense of their Christian responsibility for the common good of all, they embark upon some cooperative enterprise, they will be rewarded not merely with better income but they will find that they have built a community that will challenge the interest of intelligent and imaginative boys and girls.

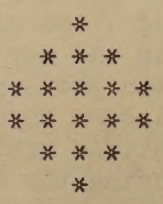
In such a rural community the youth will receive religious education from competent teachers. The life and teachings of Christ will be their inspiration. The boys will feel at home in Joseph's workshop, side by side with the young carpenter who teaches them the dignity of labor; the girls will be formed in the school of Mary, the model of maidens and mothers. If it is not possible to have a daily religious school, provision will be made to supplement the Sunday school with a religious vacation school for intensive instruction in the truths of faith.

It was in 1923, on the occasion of the St. Louis meeting of the American Country Life Association, that a group, imbued with thoughts such as these about the religious significance of the relation of the farm to the family, established the Catholic Rural Life Conference. I well recall the sentiment expressed at that meeting by the Venerable Bishop Vincent Wehrle of Bismarck, North Dakota.

"Country life," said the Bishop, who had spent forty years as a missionary in North Dakota, "country life has about it something Sacramental." He was voicing the Benedictine tradition held in the seventh century by St. Nathalen of Northumbria, of whom it is written that "he prayed while he plowed and considered that, among all the activities in the world, the cultivation of the soil comes nearest to heavenly contemplation."

It is told of the patron saint of the Catholic Rural Life Movement, St. Isidore, that because of his prayer and his faith in God two angels la-

bored by his side in the fields, and he accomplished the work of three. This parable may well convey the truth that, if rural economics is aided by religion and wholesome family life, society will reap immeasurable benefit; agriculture, the root of the tree of national life, will be sound and its branches -- commerce and industry -- will flourish and prosper. Such, I may add, were the views of Theodore Roosevelt, and their validity for American country life has not diminished during the past forty years.



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